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ABSTRACT

Language minority students filter what they hear in the classroom through their own anxieties at having to process and perform in a mainstream environment. An understanding of the principles of language development from the field of applied linguistics can help instructors work more effectively with language minority students. Several principles of language development within the applied linguistics and English as a second language (ESL) fields have implications for the classroom. The focus in language acquisition is on communication in the moment and on the accomplishment of a meaningful task, accompanied by an abundance of contextual clues, not all of which are necessarily linguistic. Students acquire language through listening and reading, even when they are not producing language through speaking and writing. Literature can also be used as a means for developing empathy in its expression of themes and problems common to humanity. Students can also write their own stories based on their cultural experiences as they relate to these themes and share their stories among their peers. Instructors must examine their own attitudes, prejudices, and stereotypes. Modelling acceptance of each student makes it clear that cultural insensitivity will not be accepted in the classroom. (Contains 23 references.) (CR)

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Understanding Students from Other Cultures: What They'd Have Us Know

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(Presented at the National Council of Teachers of English 80th Annual Convention, Atlanta, GA, November 16-21, 1990)

Bienvenidos a mi presentacion de como trabajan con estudiantes cuya lengua materna no es el idioma Inglés. Antes de comenzar me gustaria hacerles una pregunta. Por favor miren este vaso de agua. [I hold up a half-filled glass of water.] ¿Este vaso medio lleno or medio vacio? ¿Que creen ustedes? Este vaso se parece a nuestros estudiantes de ESL. ¿Cuando le enseñamos el idioma Inglés, pensamos de ellos como el vaso medio lleno o el vaso medio vacio? Si pensamos en el Inglés que desconcen, pensamos como medio vacio. Por otra parte, si pensamos en el Inglés que ellos conocen, pensamos como el vaso medio lleno. [NOTE: See Appendix A for translation.]

How did that little listening exercise make you feel? [Elicit responses.] For those of you fluent in Spanish, did you feel comfortable, laid back, even a bit superior? For those of you with rusty Spanish skills, did you feel stressed, anxious, nervous? For those of you with no Spanish skills, did you feel lost, confused, angry, frightened? Are you suddenly worried about what's coming next?

The emotions your have just experienced provide a filter--what has been called the affective filter--through which the information in my presentation would have passed, if I had continued speaking in Spanish. Your proficiency in Spanish along with your ability or willingness to "shift gears" into a language you did not expect to hear--not to mention your ability to concentrate because of fatigue or anxiety--would have determined what information or insights, if any, you would have taken from my talk. The emotional responses you just

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experienced are similar to those of our language minority students as we work with them each day. Our language minority students filter what they hear in our classrooms through their own anxieties at having to process and perform in a mainstream environment.

With the influx of lanugage minority students from various cultures to our classrooms, we wonder, when some of us have a limited background in linguistics and language teaching methodology, how we are going to take care of the needs of **all** our students. Principles of language development from the field of applied linguistics and ways that an understanding of these principles can help us work more effectively with our language minority students will help us address our dilemma. And, ironically, these principles can also support our language majority students as well.

Teachers who teach English as a second language (ESL) are quick to point out that language minority students are not deficient, either in experience or language; they are not stupid. These students have a first language and, to some extent, a second language, although this language may not yet be the language of the classroom. Their experience may not be the experience needed to be successful in our classrooms but their experience is valid. And it is on this experience and our knowledge of it that their future learning depends. Margaret Mara, local ESL teacher, describes the situation of her high school students, whose backgrounds range from poverty and war to affluence and royalty:

> They rarely mix with middle or upper track students because their limited English keeps them in less advanced classes . . . It's as if little English equals little intelligence. I know it isn't so. I know that while their education hasn't been in schools, they have skills and knowledge that would and should be appreciated if we could tap it, tap that prior knowledge tree to start the sap flowing, to give value and validity to their past, no matter how impoverished, disadvantaged, or undereducated by our standards. (5-6)

Several principles of language development from within the applied linguistics and ESL fields have implications for our classrooms. The first of these deals with the distinction between language acquisition and language learning. Individuals acquire language through a process of internalization of a language in which its sound system, its rules for grammar and syntax, and its rules of discourse becomes a tacit part of them. They may not be able to articulate the rules they use despite the fact that they are successfully communicating. The focus in language acquisition is on communication in the moment and on the accomplishment of a meaningful task, accompanied by an abundance of contextual clues, not all of which are necessarily linguistic. The focus is not on the language itself. In language learning, on the other hand, the focus is on the language itself and on its rules and structure and only secondarily on the message being communicated. An instructional setting focussing on language learning features such activities as grammar drills devoid of context and disjointed lists of vocabulary; in general, classroom talk is about the language rather than in the language.

The acquisition of a language is developmental and holistic, not linear and discrete. Riggs and Allen liken this development to a picture coming into focus as opposed to the completion of a puzzle with its discrete parts. I would add that parts of that picture occasionally go in and out of focus; a structure that we thought students knew one day may be used incorrectly on another day as they attempt to use their English in other ways. We therefore cannot construct a checklist of items in a language which our language minority students must complete successfully before they are allowed access to the mainstream classroom community. Cazden admonishes us to guard against reductionist tendencies in second language instruction which lead to "fractionalizing complex tasks into component parts that, no matter how well practiced, can

never constitute the complex whole" (11). Our challenge is to set up a classroom that fosters language acquisition.

Students acquire language through listening and reading even when they are not producing language through speaking and writing. Indeed, a student may go through a silent period after entering our classrooms for a variety of reasons; however, this silence does not meant that s/he is not listening or not acquiring English. Listening in on meaningful activities builds a linguistic base from which students can then speak. These skills--listening, speaking, reading, and writing--continue to develop interactively.

Acquisition is fostered through comprehensible input. Native speakers of a language provide comprehensible input when they use language structures and vocabulary with which listeners are familiar along with structures and vocabulary which they may not yet know. The use of contextual clues, such as visual aids in the classroom or pantomime, and the use of what has been termed caretaker speech or its classroom equivalent "teacher talk" (Krashen and Terrell 34) enable understanding. Such talk is characterized by the teacher's desire to be understood; the teacher speaks more slowly and repeats or restates the message until s/he has determined that the student has understood. Syntax may be simplified, but it is not reduced to the extent that students are not exposed to naturally grammatical English. The key is that students understand the meaning of our message as a whole, not necessarily each individual word or structure. We can determine if understanding has taken place by asking students to tell us **what** they have understood rather than **if** they have understood (Urzúa 36).

Urzúa, in her article "I Grow for a Living," describes a process she calls "mileau teaching" in which she talks about the ways she discusses a student's work, be it art project, math problem,

or personal essay with that student, asking questions to which she as teacher does not necessarily knows the answer. Not only does this interaction develop listening comprehension, it also provides a contextual model for the student that links the known, that is, what the student has produced, to the unknown, that is, the comprehensible input the teacher uses too talk about the work.

The role of the affective filter, which you experienced earlier, is also important in a student's interaction with and subsequent acquisition of a language. To the extent that a student feels comfortable, the affective filter is said to be permeable--in other words, how students feel affect how they learn. While excellent discussions of this phenomenon, as well as the role of acculturation, are found in Brown (1980), Valdes (1986), and Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), for purposes of our discussion, we will say that the extent to which all students feel safe in a classroom, feel challenged to learn, feel free to use the language despite mistakes. and feel accepted for their own uniqueness, their affective filters are open and allow them to learn. An environment perceived as hostile and rigid keeps this protective filter in place, and students must use their energy to protect their self esteem rather than to learn. Furthermore, students who feel affirmed are students who are able to affirm others. Robinson tells us that, in a multicultural setting, it is important to develop a positive self concept in all students, not just in language-minority students, because "people tend to project their feelings onto the perceptions of other people" (54). In such a supportive atmosphere, students' attempts at communication are valued through public opportunities for communication (those in front of the class, geared for success by giving them tasks we know are within their capabilities as well as private opportunities to

communicate beyond their current level of proficiency with subsequent mistakes used as tools for learning (Enright and McCloskey 442).

Setting up an effective and positively affective learning environment in the classroom is ultimately **our** responsibility. And setting up a classroom which welcomes language minority students means setting up a classroom which welcomes all students. Such a student-centered classroom is actually a community of learners, one which validates and celebrates each person. Setting up a community of learners begins with our attitudes as teachers. Before entering the classroom at the beginning of the year--and indeed at the beginning of each day--we need to examine our own prejudices and stereotypes. Articulating our prejudices, in a teaching log or journal perhaps, helps us face them and deal with them. This recognition is important because, as Robinson points out, people's attitudes are consistent with their stereotyping; people tend to make judgements about groups of people and to stick with them, discounting counterexamples as anomalies (63). The success with which we make peace with these issues fosters our acceptance of cultural diversity, which, in turn, sets the tone for a community within our classrooms and helps determine the extent to which our language majority students accept our language minority students.

Modelling our acceptance of each student, we make it clear that we will not accept cultural insensitivity in our classrooms. We encourage the ides that, though we are members of different ethnic groups, we share a common humanity. We can foster this notion in various ways. We can begin by learning each student's name and the correct pronunciation of that name and by expecting our students to do the same for each other. Robinson (70-71) presents exercises for developing empathy among students. In one instance, in response to a story of a Vietnamese

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boy new to the United States, students were asked to write about a time when they were new to an area of a group and they were afraid because they did not know how they would be treated. Another exercise asks students (and perhaps teachers, too!) to complete "I-messages" such as "I felt embarrassed when _____" or "I felt excited when _____," after which students compare responses in small groups and look for patterns in their responses. Still another suggestion is to have students observe and report on the activities on campus, looking for similarities among different groups of people rather than differences.

Literature can also be used as a means for developing empathy in its expression of themes and problems common to humanity. (See articles by Ruth Spack and Joyce Merrill Valdes for additional ideas.) Students can also write their own stories based on their cultural experiences as they relate to these themes and share these stories among their peers. As we encourage such writing, we need to be sensitive to the fact that both language majority and language minority students had traumatic experiences.

Having set up an empathetic community, we turn our attention to more school-oriented tasks. Language minority students must not be relegated to filling in work sheets in a corner of the classroom until their English proficiency has reached a predetermined level. Enright and McCloskey (439-442) suggest that we set up communicative classrooms in which activities are organized for collaboration, purpose, student interest, previous experience and variety. Within this setting we provide task-oriented group work which allows students to contribute cognitively as well as linguistically. Working with group in a meaningful task provides meaningful interaction that supports language acquisition. We can also set up assignments in which the

language minority student has the information needed to complete the task; such an assignment offsets the notion that language minority students have nothing to contribute in a classroom (Robinson 64). As an procedural way of reducing anxiety, we can set up a classroom routine, such as noting homework on the board or having a set place for turning in homework, so that students know what to expect.

In the cognitive area, too, we must be on guard against stereotyping ethnic groups as having certain learning styles or a propensity for different types of group interactions. ESL teachers I queried pointed out that as much diversity exists within ethnic populations as between them. Jo Ann Crandall of the Center of Applied Linguistics asserts that students are more individual than their cultures and that there are so many learning styles that membership in a group is not a guarantee of learning in a predetermined way. Therefore, in setting up our activities, we should be aware that the more varied the activities and the more multisensory the input, the better chance we have of accommodating our students' various learning styles.

We also need to trust the expertise of our ESL resource teachers. Collier (1989) points out that language minority students often take longer to adjust to the mainstream academic and linguistic environment successfully than either they or their parents or school administrators might like. The tendency may be to push for discontinuing their work with an ESL teacher before s/he feels the student is ready. With respect to a language minority student's work in our class, our tendency might also be to pass the student on when, in fact, we feel that holding the student back may be more beneficial to the student's acquisition of English in the long run. This decision is certainly not an easy one for us to face. And while it is true that language acquisition is developmental over time, it is also true that none of us teachers is clairvoyant; we do not know

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how well they will continue to acquire English after they have left us. Still, if our language minority students feel comfortable with us, they might also feel affirmed enough to trust us when we tell them that they will benefit more by continuing to work in English at their current level than by being passed on (because we feel sorry for them).

Rest assured that, at some point in time, language minority students will be expected to participate competently in the language majority of their choice, be it the work place or the college classroom. To allow them to get by with less than that which they are capable of is to do them a great disservice and to deny them the language empowerment too which they are entitled.

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APPENDIX A

Welcome to my presentation on working with students who are non-native speakers of English. Before I begin, I would like to ask a question. Please look at this glass of water. It is half empty or half full? What do you think? This glass is analogous to our ESL students. When we work with them, do we think of them as half full glasses or half empty ones? If we think of the English they do not know, we think of them as half empty. If, on the other hand, we think of the English they do know, we think of them as half full.